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## Diversity Dialogue Fora Sweden

### “Investing in immigrants; a smart investment with high return”

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of June 2021, [SweTurk](http://www.sweturk.org) (Swedish Turkish Business Association) organised the second session of its online Diversity Dialogue Fora (DDF). The topic was “Investing in immigrants; a smart investment with high return”. The main guests of the session were Gunilla Almgren (Former president of SMEs-United), Sedat Arif (President of the Labour Market and Social Affairs Committee of the City of Malmö), Bashar Mustafa (social entrepreneur), Ahmet Bahceci (founder of Biohumus Sweden) and Laura Mariotti (Deputy Director of WeGate Project).

Academia and media have broadly discussed migration issues. Unfortunately, the media tends to focus more on the costs rather than the benefits that migration can provide in the long turn.

An interesting study conducted by the Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations (Saco) in 2015, shows that training an immigrant doctor to practice in Sweden costs just one-tenth of the price of educating a Swede doctor from scratch. Similar calculations can be made for civil engineers, economists, and architects. Furthermore, statistics shows that industries that employ the new immigrants have changed over time. Now Sweden needs more high-tech immigrants such software developers, (RPA) Robotic Process experts, AI (artificial intelligence) experts and Data Scientists. In addition to that, a large part of healthcare, care of elderly, hotels, restaurants, and transport depend on immigrant labour. Therefore, without immigration, Sweden’s labour force would decrease significantly.

These figures indicate that investing in immigrants has a huge potential. At a low cost, there is the opportunity to quickly invest in the Swedish labour market while matching the needs of qualified immigrant workers. In short, investing in immigrants is a smart investment that is beneficial for both parties in Sweden. The alternative scenario can result in the waste of capacities, as society will not fully exploit the potential of highly skilled immigrants. In this session, we discussed how not to waste this potential.

*Gunilla Almgren, the Former president of SMEs-United, has been running her business for 35 years: she imports and sells products in plumbing and water saving since 1973. Gunilla is also in the regional board of Företagarna, the network of organisations representing around 60,000 entrepreneurs through 250 local associations across Sweden. The organisation offers networks, knowledge and practical help and drives the development for a better entrepreneurial climate, so that entrepreneurs get the right conditions to be successful.*

According to Gunilla, when we talk about integration, we should also mean entrepreneurship, and not only helping people getting a job. “One of the most important things that we can do for Europe business is creating “new jobs”. Entrepreneurship is the key factor to reach the goal. During my work in the EU, I figured out that people like to talk about entrepreneurship and the importance of small medium enterprises in the economy of Europe. Nevertheless, few politicians and stakeholders seem to understand the difficulties entrepreneurs are facing. I would say we need to be united to remind them how important entrepreneurs are”.

“We should be thankful to immigrant entrepreneurs for taking the risks to be entrepreneurs and creating large scale jobs. EU passed a legislation last year to attract talented entrepreneurs outside Europe. It is a good start from the EU level, but we need more legislation that foster immigrant entrepreneurship. As local business organisations, we should also support/mentor immigrant entrepreneurs. We need to open our networks and guide them to find finance/funds for their business. The organization Företagarna has launched a program called “Entrepreneurship for new people in Sweden”. The program offers tailored training, mentorship and business support to entrepreneurs who are new in Sweden. This initiative is important to increase diversity in the Swedish business community.

If we can do good business, on legal ground of course, it does not matter where entrepreneurs come from or which background they have. Therefore, it is important to recognise the diploma and qualifications from other countries. This process needs to be organised quickly so that foreign entrepreneurs can start their business as soon as possible.”

*Sedat Arif (president of the Labour Market and Social Affairs Committee of the City of Malmö)*, agrees that the political process can sometimes be a slow machinery in the integration process. Nevertheless, some promising programs have been initiated in recent years by the government. “Fast track” is one of the programs launched in 2015 by PES (Public Employment Service), trade unions and employer organisations with the aim of establishing contact between employers and the newly arrived immigrants. The Fast track program includes early validation and assessment of previous education, as well as vocational skills. Among those who participate to the program, an average of 40% percent were employed 19-21 months after the start of the program.<sup>1</sup> According to Arif, it usually takes between 7 and 10 years for an immigrant to fully integrate into the labour market. With this kind of fast-track programs, they manage to decrease that time to 4/5 years for some sectors.

Arif says that people come to Sweden with education, but they cannot use their qualifications: for instance, there is a huge number of taxi drivers who have university degrees. It is a disaster and a huge waste of human capital. Flexible solutions need to be found to make it easy for talents to enter the labour market. Women who do not have education are the most disadvantage group in labour market. “Yalla trappan” and “The way in” are two good projects that support women in entering the labour market. The city of Malmö cooperates and finance for these two projects.

When people start working, paying taxes and are an active part of the society, it triggers a virtuous circle in society. When women start working children get more independent and integrate in a better way, which means that a more inclusive labour market leads to a better integration and social cohesion.

*Bashar Mustaf (social entrepreneur)*, is a company owner exporting Swedish products. He is also a social entrepreneur working on integration and immigration issues. “To be integrated” according to Bashar is living a “normal life” in Sweden. The difference is that those who are born in the country

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<sup>1</sup> Calmfors, L & Gassen S. N, 2019: Integrating Immigrants into the Nordic Labour Markets, Nord 2019

learn this “normal” from their families. However, immigrants do not have this chance and they need to be taught and learn during their integration journey.

Bashar explains the right way to integration with his “the zipper theory”. On one side, there are companies who are willing to open the door to people who newly came to Sweden. On the other side, we have immigrants who have the right education, skills and they want to integrate to society. When these two parts cooperate, it creates a win - win situation. He experienced that himself. He barely spoke Swedish when he started practice in a local company in Sweden. During his practice he told the company owner that he could help them to find new markets in middle east where he had experience and established contacts. They agreed and Bashar enlarged the company operations to Middle East and increased sales around 1, 5 million euro”.

According to Bashar, the integration process may fail because people were not able to find a way in. Many factors contribute to this: for instance, the lack of language and “society skills”. These skills can range from “knowing how to sort the garbage” to do things “according to book” as company owner. The best way to learn the language and learn the social codes is to have a job. Therefore, there is the need for more companies that employ immigrants.

*Ahmet Bahceci (founder of Biohumus Sweden)*, came to Sweden in 2002. He figured out that immigrant entrepreneurs were concentrated in certain sectors, like restaurants or taxi services, etc. He wanted to try something different and started his company: Bihomus Sweden. The company is specialised in the production of organic products: it was one of the first in this field and exporting goods across Scandinavia.

According to Ahmet, despite the long history of immigration, some organisations are still resistant to adapt to the “new Sweden”. Like other immigrant entrepreneurs, he faced challenges in getting support from institutions. As an immigrant, he had to face more challenges and be more resilient. “It would have been easier to find money if I have asked finance to open a new restaurant. I do not remember how many times I was so close to give up. As immigrant entrepreneur we expect from organisations to be more open to new ideas, especially to those came from us, immigrants.”

*Laura Mariotti (deputy director of WeGate Project)* was another of the panellist. WeGate is an umbrella organisation aiming at fostering women entrepreneurship across Europe. The project is funded by the EU and more than two thousand women entrepreneurs are part of the community.

The entrepreneurial system is dominated by men and women entrepreneurs are underrepresented. When it comes to immigrant women entrepreneurs, they suffer a double disadvantage. Main challenges for women entrepreneurs are stereotypes and discrimination based on gender, access to finance and funding information.

“As umbrella organization, we support women entrepreneurs on three categories: training, networking, and support. We update them with fresh information on funding, finance and changing legislations. We train them on digital skills and provide them mentorship to develop their business. Our networking activities open doors for partnership to their business. “*We gate support*” is an online platform helping entrepreneurs to start their business through tailored -made service based on we gate community, Webarometer, and WE gate advisory board. To get data of our own, we launched the first pan European survey on women entrepreneurs and challenges they face in the ecosystem surrounding them.” said Laura Mariotti.

According to Mariotti, resources are available but sometimes it is difficult to find them. It is important to have a mapping as detailed as possible of the tools and information that exist. “WeGate” does that and make the information available for women entrepreneurs. “We sometimes focus too much on entrepreneurs themselves, to their capacity and their ability to get soft skills. However, we also need to focus to what extent the ecosystem surrounding them is enabling enough and do something about that.”

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